

Shabbat 10 04 19 Sermon

So I remember back in the service at some point, we were talking about the face. Do you remember that? Talking about the face as the door. The song that we sang, L'cha dodi, come beloved, it did the word dodi, dode. Like the word David. Three letters in Hebrew, through dalet, vav, dalet, and it really is door, connection, door. Because the fourth letter of the Hebrew alphabet is a dalet, which is literally door. So the beloved is the door. The beloved is the door. And in some sense, each and every human that meets us in each and every moment of our lives is a choice between a sense of being at home with or being outside of the sanctuary of the present moment and the presence of the other.

And we go in and out of that, right? We're not always available. We don't always meet the face that meets us with love and kindness, and we're not always met by love and kindness, but that's the vision. See the world as potentially a place where we assuage one another's natural homesickness. Because to be human is to be homesick. St. Augustine said it well. He said, our hearts are restless for you, God, and we will have no repose, no home, until we rest in you. So all of us, to some degree, whether we like it or not, are always doing hospitality. That's our business. We're in the hospitality business.

Danny Meyer and Levinas meet here. And to some degree or not, we have the greatest imaginable access to love and kindness. We don't need a code of Jewish law, although there are plenty of beautiful things in there or in the Sharia or in the Hadith or in any of the different scriptures. Every human being that meets us, meets us and says, I'm mitzvah ready. I'm a good deed waiting for your consummation. Will you, in some way, God forbid, not instrumentally, we're not using people to get brownie points with God, but are you meeting this opportunity? And we get it on the high holidays. I mean, we get it. We walk out of here. A lot of us do. Maybe not all of us. Maybe some of us walk out of here and it's like, get me to the closest, you know, I don't know, coffee, I don't know, whatever, you know. But a lot of us walk out and we have the experience that the great Christian mystic Thomas Merton had when he said that were we to look at one another with real true eyes for one moment, we wouldn't be able to handle it. We would throw ourselves at one another's feet and worship each other. And thank God that we don't have that all the time, probably, right? But sometimes we walk out of a place like this, a space where people are being authentically allowing the music and the tradition and the marinating in the high holidays. We walk out, we're looking at, in every bush, a flame. We appreciate and also suffer because of that. We see the beauty and we also feel its pain.

I had the honor of being with one of my dearest, dearest, most beloved congregants here and one of my dear friends on the morning before a very scary operation recently. And the minute he saw my face, he began to cry and I cried with him. And then we walked 10 steps and he said, for some reason this morning, everything is making me cry. And I thought to myself, wow, he's alive. That aliveness, not brought on necessarily by fear because that's true too, but also just exposed to life. Here we are. Here's a human being from Turkey, a human being from 102nd Street, a human being from the 90s, humans, mystery. And we have this awesome, amazing opportunity to meet them and welcome them. But what gets in the way? Besides the fact that it's not the high holidays every single week, even though I

said it was, but it's not really. Or the way that we keep Shabbat could be, but we don't necessarily do it that way.

One of the things that gets in the way for me is a little bit of a story that I read recently from Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach. His father was a well-known German rabbi. He had a big community and one high holidays. This is actually, Shlomo told the story and actually had a record of it. His father received a letter from a man in the community immediately after like Rosh Hashanah when there was the priestly blessing where people who are of the priestly lineage come up and they pray and they bless the people. We know this, dochening it's called, priestly blessing.

We do it here at Romemu. They don't always do it in other places, but we do it here at Romemu. And so the priest came up to the bima, up to the, right in front of the ark with Rabbi Carlebach's father. And at the end of Rosh Hashanah, he received a letter that said, Dear Rabbi Carlebach, the Polish Jews, because Polish Jews at that time would also, Polish Jews were not necessarily the most received Jews in the German Jewish community at the time. He said this influx of the Polish Jews, he said this to Rabbi Carlebach, there was a man standing next to me as I prepared to pray on behalf of the people and his socks, because they take off their shoes, his socks smelled so badly that I couldn't focus in my prayers. I mean, if I weren't a rabbi, I don't know if I would believe that kind of letter, but I believe it. I absolutely believe it. And so this is what Rabbi Carlebach wrote back, Naftali Carlebach, he wrote back, Dear so-and-so, I fully expected to receive a letter from you after Rosh Hashanah, but in that letter, I had hoped to read you say these words, Dear Rabbi, there seems to be a fellow traveler who can't seem to afford new socks and a clean bath or shower in which to clean himself. And I would like to personally step forward and pay for those things on his behalf, sincerely.

It's such a beautiful story on so many levels. First of all, because it's true. It's beautiful because of the way that he disarmed this person and gently and very powerfully rebuked him without making him feel ashamed. It's very powerful also to name that many of us, if we're really honest with ourselves, we're both of these characters in the story depending on where we are in our lives. At any given moment, we see life through our own particular lens and everything is related to where we sit. Where am I and how is this impacting me? Is it good for the Jews? Is it good for me? Is it good for the Republicans, the Democrats? Is it good for those who live on 90th Street or 100th Street? Right, we have our own place.

And just for a moment to imagine, Rabbi Karbach said, what it's like to be that person, to shift our gaze, to sit differently in our chair. And maybe that's what it means when the tradition says that from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur the entire work that we are engaged in is moving God from the kissei, from the throne of judgment to the throne of compassion. Change your seat. Change your seat. Live in someone else's home for a moment. Not just make yourself an abode for them, but live where they live. And just for a moment, imagine what they might need. And if we do it for one another, nobody will be left out. Because you say, listen, I'm gonna sit where you sit, but who's gonna sit where I'm sitting? It orients us differently.

It changes the nature of where we are. So it's a challenge, I think, for myself, for us, just to gently think about where it is that we might sit in someone else's seat, how we might not

only be a home for others who are homesick, but also imagine ourselves from their perspective and what we might do to support them and help them. It goes a long way towards being at Yom Kippur in the right state of mind.

The story is told, and I'm coming in for a landing here, this is a story that I just recently read and I loved it. It was a story told in, I think, in the Hasidic lineage, I'm not sure which one, about this time of the year is a time when everybody is welcomed home. But really the truth is that many of us are scared to come home. We're scared to come home or we're scared to make someone else feel at home. And they tell a parable about a son whose father, the king, of course, sends him away for having done something wrong. And after some amount of time in exile, the father sends to the son to come back home. And the child, of course, is excited to come back home, but he says, how do I know that my father is really sincere? And the messenger says that your father said that when you come to the town and see white, a white flag hanging in some way, if you see a white flag, it will let you know that I really want you back. And so, of course, the child comes home and as he makes his way into the town, there are white flags everywhere. He sees them and recognizes that it's always possible to come home.

But in the Hasidic twist, the author said maybe God also is the child. And maybe God also comes around Rosh Hashanah and wonders, is there a home for me? And then sees all of us in our white and says, there's a synagogue or there's a community where people are letting me back in. So we get to do this dance with ourselves and with the other and say, I'll be a safe space for you. I'll be a home for you. And we get to do with God to say, like, here are the conditions. I'm willing to let you come back, but on these conditions, Shabbat Shabbat, it's a Shabbat of coming back. Of being at home.

I bless each and every one of you with whatever that means for you as we rise for the Aleinu.